

PEACE IN LIGHT

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“Blessed are You, our God, Creator of time and space, who performs miracles for our ancestors, in the days of long ago and in this time.” — HANUKKAH BLESSING

When Simeon receives the 8-day old baby Jesus in the temple to be circumcised, named, and designated as holy to the Lord, he praises God declaring that his eyes have now seen God’s salvation in human form, one who is “a light for revelation ... and for glory.” (Luke 2: 32) This light opens Simeon’s and our eyes to the presence of God. From the dawn of Creation in Genesis when God said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3), to the star of Bethlehem that guided the wise men to Jesus (Matthew 2:7-10), light is symbolic to us as an indication of the presence of God.



Talmudic Oil Lamp, Barakat Gallery

The use of light as a metaphor has a long history in Judeo-Christian tradition. The Israelites were instructed to maintain a perpetual light before the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 27:20-21 and Leviticus 24:1-2). Thus, we have the justification for the future act of the Maccabees when in 165 BCE they rededicated the temple in Jerusalem after defeating the Syrian-Greeks who had turned the temple into a place of pagan sacrifice. In the first book of Maccabees, a part of the Protestant Apocrypha, the celebration and rededication of the temple went on for eight days. The Talmud, a book of study expanding on rabbinic law and written long after the Hebrew Bible, (Shabbat 21b) also explains that “when the Syrian-Greeks captured the Temple, they desecrated all the jugs of oil that the High Priest had prepared for lighting the

Temple menorah (candelabrum). After much searching, only one small undefiled jug still bearing the unbroken seal of the High Priest could be found. This cruse contained only enough oil to burn in the menorah for one day. Nevertheless, the High Priest kindled the menorah and a miracle happened: the menorah flame continued to burn for eight days.”¹ In remembrance of this miracle and the deliverance from oppression, the Jewish people celebrate annually the Festival of Lights otherwise known as Chanukah or Hanukkah.

The menorah that is traditionally found in Jewish places of worship has seven branches rather than the eight or nine-branched hanukiah used for the celebration of Hanukkah. Because the Romans outlawed the seven-branched Temple candelabrum after leveling the Temple in 70 CE, people began lighting oil lamps with eight branches to recall the “miracle in the Temple.”





Hanukkah Menorah at the Western Wall in Jerusalem

Hanukkah, which means “dedication” in Hebrew, begins on the 25th of the Hebrew month of Kislev usually falling in November or December. The holiday, which begins on December 18 this year, is celebrated by the lighting of a nine-branched menorah called a hanukkiah, as well as the eating of traditional foods, the playing of games, and the sharing of gifts.

The Hanukkah celebration primarily involves the lighting of hanukkiah on each of the festival’s eight nights. Each night another candle is added to the hanukkiah after sundown; the ninth candle, called the shamash (helper), is used to light the others. Jews typically recite blessings during this ritual and display the menorah prominently in a window as a reminder to others of the miracle that inspired the holiday.²

In another allusion to the Hanukkah miracle, traditional Hanukkah foods are fried in oil. Potato pancakes (known as latkes) and jam-filled donuts (sufganiyot) are particularly popular in many Jewish households. Other Hanukkah customs include playing with four-sided spinning tops called dreidels and exchanging gifts. From a religious perspective,

however, it remains a relatively minor holiday that places no restrictions on working, attending school, or other activities.³

“Light is one of the enduring symbols for God in our sacred texts,” says Rabbi Lauren Eichler Berkun. She quotes the new Conservative chumash, *Eitz Hayim*, which as she observes “offers a profound commentary on the lighting of the menorah in the Tabernacle and the Eternal Light which adorns the ark of every synagogue:”

“Why has light been such a favorite symbol of God? Perhaps because light itself cannot be seen. We become aware of its presence when it enables us to see other things. Similarly, we cannot see God, but we become aware of God’s presence when we see the beauty of the world, when we experience love and the goodness of our fellow human beings.”⁴



“So, the real spirit of Hanukkah goes beyond remembering a military victory of old; it is about tolerance and awareness of all people’s rights to self-determination.” says Rabbi Moshe Raphael Halfon of Mt. Sinai Synagogue in Cheyenne. “When I am asked if Hanukkah and Christmas have anything in common, I usually explain that they are quite different. Christmas is the foundational holiday of the Christian faith, while Hanukkah commemorates one among many historical events.” Although they both happen to fall around the same time of the year, Hanukkah and Christmas are very different holidays. Yet, they do share a common theme in “peace and good will to all.”⁵

“PEACE AND GOOD WILL TO ALL”

Later in his life, Jesus told the Pharisees, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) While we do not see the physical person of Jesus himself today, when we see the light of Christ shine through those around us, then like our Jewish siblings who gaze upon the beautifully lit menorah, we are reminded of God’s presence in our lives. As we accept each other with our differences we grow in community. As the Jewish person prays the words of the Shema prayer, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), the Christian is reminded by Jesus of the two great commandments, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... and ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39)

Together we can love God and love our neighbor, bringing us closer to peace in this world.

“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” — SHEMA PRAYER

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¹Kolatch, Alfred J. The Jewish Book of Why. Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1981, Volume I, 262.

²Information gathered from <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/hanukkah> accessed November 2022.

³Information gathered from <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/hanukkah> accessed November 2022.

⁴Berkun, Lauren Eichler. “The Symbolism of Light” published on The Jewish Theological Seminary website on December 27, 2003: <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/the-symbolism-of-light/> accessed November 2022.

⁵Halfon, Moshe Raphael. “Hanukkah – A Festival of Light, Hope and Tolerance” press release, 2021.